

The Life and Times of the Woman in Red- Part IV

by The Woman in Red

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The Life and Times of the Woman in Red- Part IV

I AM THE WOMAN YOU ARE LOOKING FOR

I am not, by my nature, a trusting soul. It took a great act of will to step forward and then step forward again. I twined my arms around his neck and ran my fingers through his hair. His arms closed around me, blotting out everything except my awareness of his warm smooth skin against my body. I gasped as I felt the intense pleasure rising up in me. I moaned and clutched at him as the spasms ripped through me.

I sagged in his arms, weakened by the intensity of my orgasm. He picked me up and laid me gently on the bed. I stretched like a cat while he positioned himself alongside of me. "That was mighty impressive, Jones. You made me come without doing a thing. It usually takes a lot of work for myself and my partner to get me aroused, and I still usually end up faking it."

He looked smug, "And I've only begun." He stroked me again with only one long finger, igniting a trail of pleasure down my neck, first circling one nipple and then the other. I came again at that point, but he just smiled and continued. Down across my stomach and to my sex, where he probed at the warm wetness, making my whole body convulse as I came with a shriek and a curse.

I pleaded weakness and begged for time out to rest.

"No," he refused, and proceeded to repeat his actions, this time with his lips and tongue. I groaned with ecstasy as he nibbled and tasted his way down my neck. His suckling on my nipples caused waves of pleasure so strong that I was sure they would capsize the Living Dead Girl. I stopped trying to count my orgasms when he moved to lie

between my spread legs and buried his face at the juncture, my fingers tangled in his hair. My body bucked uncontrollably beneath him and I screeched like a wild thing as he pleased me.

He stopped and raised his head to look at me. He smiled, still looking rather smug, "I believe you are ready for me now."

I tensed up and tried to get out from under him as he moved himself in place above me. He sighed and rolled his eyes at me, repeating my earlier behavior, "I do wish you would believe me when I tell you that this is not going to hurt."

"I'm a scientist Jones, I don't 'believe' anything. I base my conclusions on the available data. And the available data disproves your hypothesis."

He kissed me to shut me up, and I settled myself beneath him and closed my eyes. As soon as I was fully relaxed and well on my way to another orgasm, he entered me in one slow, smooth stroke. I groaned at the intensely pleasurable sensation and looked at him in utter amazement. "Incredible," I managed to gasp out.

"I told you it wouldn't hurt. Maybe the next time I tell you something, you'll believe me."

"Don't count on it, Jones. It's too late for you to make a believer out of me."

He imitated my earlier tone, "Whatever," before returning to kissing me. He held still inside of me for a few more minutes, then began sliding slowly in and out of me, increasing his speed gradually in response to my own thrusts against him.

I began to orgasm, having them one after another, each one more intense than the one before. Our bodies were slamming together so fast it was almost a blur, and I wondered idly just how fast and how hard an Agent was capable of thrusting. That thought was cut off moments later when I reached my climax, clawing his back and screaming his name.

I went completely limp beneath him and groaned. I was panting and gasping for air, soaked with sweat, and reeking of the combined scents of sex and Agent. I wanted to smack the smug expression off his face as he rolled off me and gathered me into his arms and rested his cheek against my forehead.

I realized in that moment that I had made the right decision. Too much mind-blowing sex with an expert and highly adaptive manipulator like Jones would indeed be my destruction, destroying first the walls I'd built to protect myself, and then destroying my very soul.

I eased away from him and sat up, leaning weakly against the pillows. I definitely needed a cigarette after that. I rummaged around in the drawer of the nightstand and found a pack of clove cigarettes and a lighter. I lit one and drew in a couple of deep drags before exhaling.

Jones pulled me back into the circle of his arms and I took another lungful of smoke and blew it in his face as I pushed him away from me. I gave him a dirty look and informed him, "I've had enough,

Jones."

He sat up and regarded me with a puzzled frown on his face, "I don't understand. From my review of the available data, I concluded that women wished to be 'cuddled' for a considerable period of time after having sex."

I laughed in his face, "Jones, there are some major flaws in that logic."

His tone was wry, "And I suppose you are about to enumerate them for me."

"I certainly am. Most women do wish to be cuddled after sex."

He interjected, "But not you? Because I'm a monster, right?"

"Don't interrupt me when I'm lecturing you, Jones. First, many women use sex as a way to get men to be intimate with them. Cuddling is a form of intimacy. They equate one with the other. I never have. I have sex to satisfy a drive. I have no need for that sort of intimacy."

I took another drag off the cigarette, exhaling the smoke as I continued, "Second, intimacy implies some form of emotional attachment. Emotional attachments are not possible for your kind and I have made it a policy to reject the development of such feelings for any sex partner-human or not."

"In conclusion, I do not wish to be cuddled after sex." I got up, stubbed out my cigarette and informed him that it was time to get ready to return to the Centre. He muttered something about there being flaws in my logic but I ignored him.

Somewhat later, showered, dressed and armed, I retrieved my suit jacket from the pilothouse and locked up the Girl. I turned as we walked away and took a long look at her. We entered the Control Room. Neo, Lisa and Anne were waiting for us. Lisa and Anne were smirking and poking each other. Brown's radio lay on the table.

"What's so funny."

Neo put his head down on the table and I could see his shoulders shaking. The two women looked at each other for a long moment. *So, was it really THAT good? * inquired Lisa.

Whatever do you mean, I replied innocently.

Anne remarked, *We all heard you screaming through Brown's radio.* She held it up. The sneaks had turned it on and attached an output cable to a small portable stereo.

Jones, oh, Jones. God, Please, Yes! Lisa imitated me perfectly.

Mortified, I groaned, and felt my face and ears grow hot as I blushed scarlet, "You shitheads!"

The three of them burst out laughing, and I decided that Brown's killing me would indeed be my deliverance. I knew these two, the news

was probably passing through the Resistance at the speed of gossip, far faster than the speed of light.

Jones came over to me, "What's so funny? And why do you look so unhappy?"

I rounded on him, smacked him on the arm and scolded him, " You idiot! You left your radio on. They've all been sitting here listening while we were, uh..."

"Oh."

Lisa crowed, "And we taped it too!" She pushed the 'play' button and the sound of my voice screaming Jones' name filled the room before I punched the 'stop' button with my clenched fist.

"You bitches. I've said it before and I'll say it again, with friends like you, who needs Agents?" I stalked out of the room and stood in the hall waiting for the merriment to die down. I kicked a wastebasket down the hall and swore.

When I got myself under control, I marched back in and addressed the roomful of giggling humans and one uncomfortable Agent, "OK, let's get this show on the road. The sooner we get started, the sooner we'll see the back of his," I gestured at Jones, "head going out the door."

I opened a door into the Box and we all filed inside, except Lisa and Anne. I checked my sidearm one last time while Jones sat next to Brown and inserted the cable in his ear. I changed the egress of the door for the Agents to use as an exit that would take them to an alley in the worst part of town. He nodded to me when he was ready and I sat down next to him. Neo stood nearby, ready to shield me from Brown. He was heavily armed.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly as I regarded Brown's peaceful face. Jones reached over and squeezed my hand briefly, and I looked up at him, smiling wanly. Lisa and Anne filled my mind with sarcastic remarks and I looked away. *That's quite enough from you two. Silence! * I used the chat's ignore function and was spared any further comments from the peanut gallery.

I reached out and took up Brown's flaccid hand. I looked intently at his face and smiled. I addressed him, "I AM the woman you are looking for," as I hit him with all I had.

His eyes flew open and his body convulsed, arching off the mattress. Jones's stylus flew in a blur over the PalmPilot's screen. I let go of his hand and leapt up. Neo grabbed me and pushed me behind him. I peered fearfully over his shoulder.

Brown sat up and looked at Jones. His expression was confused, "Jones! What is going on here? Where am I? Why haven't I been able to access my user interface for so long? What happened?" Jones removed the cable from Brown's ear and spoke to him at some length in a low voice. My nerves grew tighter and tighter until I thought I was going to snap from the tension.

Jones stood up and helped Brown to stand, he was unsteady only for a moment, and then he caught sight of me eyeing him warily from behind

Neo, "You are the woman I am looking for," he said in his clear, musical voice. I shrank behind Neo's back. I had my hand inside my jacket, ready to draw down on him if needed.

Neo addressed him, "And you are going to have to go through me to get to her."

He recognized Neo, I could see the fear in his eyes. He looked at Jones, still obviously confused.

Jones took his arm and dragged him to the door. I opened it for him and backed clear of it. Brown looked back at me as Jones shoved him through it. I knew that one day he and I would meet again, and I would meet my fate at his hands.

We left the Box and returned to the Control Room. We shut down all of the equipment and cleared out. I pocketed Brown's radio. I'd have the techs start dismantling the place in the morning. It had served its purpose, now I needed the space for other purposes.

I went upstairs to my office and stood looking out the window. The Centre had become my prison. Agent Brown was out there somewhere looking for me and he wouldn't stop until he found me and killed me.

Lisa and Anne came clattering in and threw themselves in my visitor chairs. Their faces were alight with prurient curiosity.

I scowled at them, "To begin with, that incident involving myself and Agent Jones and the tape you made have been determined to be highly classified. If anyone besides you two or Neo turns out to have any knowledge of what occurred, there will be disciplinary action taken."

I addressed their unspoken questions in order to avoid any further embarrassment. "Yes, it was the best sex I've ever had. It was unbelievable." I indicated Brown's radio on the desk, "If you are ever looking for a good time, just give him a call."

Lisa remarked something about hoping never to be that desperate, and Anne nodded her agreement. I sighed. Time to get down to business. "Ladies, I promised to inform you as to why I'm not dressed in red," I indicated my black attire.

"Yeah," replied Anne, "You always wear red, it's kind of like your personal trademark."

Lisa agreed, "Everyone calls you the Woman in Red. What are we going to call you now?"

"Since the beginning of the Resistance, there has always been a Woman or Man in Red. The Woman in Red isn't a person, it's an office." I leaned back in my chair, "It's the office of the deepest-cover Intelligence operative in the Zion Resistance. Trinity was the Woman in Red for a time, but a traitor blew her cover and I succeeded her. I've been in that office for 10 years, which is a record."

"The job of the Woman in Red is to be invisible to the enemy. To them, I didn't exist. I've been out of the Matrix since I was five years old, and my original birth records were changed and a death was

recorded. Until very recently I could walk right under an Agent's nose and they would assume I was just another of their slaves. It's our behavior that gives us away. Unless they try to make a network connection to us, they can't tell we've been unplugged."

"Only the Woman in Red can live in the Matrix and live in a house full of minds still hardwired into the Matrix without fear or arousing suspicion."

Lisa interrupted, "Wait a minute. You said 'Intelligence operative'. We don't work for Intelligence, we are part of the Scientific Research Bureau."

"I also said 'deepest-cover'. The Woman in Red is usually part of Field Operations, but because of what the Oracle told me years ago, I've refused to cooperate and do field work. Instead, they made me a research analyst, ultimately assigning me to this administrative post. You two work for Scientific, and most of Scientific assumes that I do as well. I built the Centre from the ground up, we were just a tiny project in the beginning with just a couple of offices here in the Matrix, and a few researchers from Scientific. As the Centre has grown, I've 'borrowed' more scientists."

Anne interjected, "I don't understand. Why do we need an Intelligence operative running a scientific research facility? We have nothing to do with their activities."

"Actually, we are a key part of Intelligence. The field operatives provide us with our data in the form of their reports and transcripts of their debriefings. Then, here at the Center, researchers analyze that information and develop recommendations and conclusions, which go back to Intelligence HQ to be developed into policies and procedures for use in the field by our operatives. It's been my job to develop and facilitate that information transfer. This job has required someone who is both scientist and Intelligence operative, in order to get cooperation from both groups."

They sat staring at me, amazed at how little they actually knew about me, although we had been chums at work and at play for years. I could tell from their mental comments that it had now become clear to them why I did not talk about anything personal and had never allowed myself the luxury of emotional attachments.

Intelligence operatives live by different rules. Those rules keep our covers from being blown and allow us to survive. It's a lonely way to live.

WIPE THEM OUT, WIPE THEM ALL OUT

"So," Lisa looked confused, "why didn't you tell us this years ago?" Anne nodded in agreement.

"Only a few high-level individuals within the Resistance know the name and purpose of the Woman in Red. You don't have the proper security clearance. Now that I'm no longer in that office, I am able to tell you a few of my secrets. I'm sorry I've had to hide so much from you, but I've had no choice."

"There is going to be a major reorg of the entire group. Effective immediately, the Centre as we know it no longer exists."

"What?, interrupted Anne, "What about all the research?"

"I'm getting to that." I got up and went to my whiteboard and started sketching out the current org chart of the Centre. "The Centre was designed to house the Matrix and Agent research projects. The Matrix group has expanded rapidly under my administration. The Agent research project staff here at the Centre is currently only a token group of paper-pushers, with all the scientists working out of Zion H.Q., also under my administration. They don't even realize that I exist. I've been reviewing all of their reports, but they don't know that. I've been working in the background of that project since I put on the red suit and started the Centre."

I started erasing and drawing new boxes and lines. "We had already planned to move the Centre to a new building. What is going to happen now is that the Matrix research project will be expanded to a Section, and a Section Chief will be assigned to lead it. The Matrix Research Section will be moving to the new building. I will stay here, and oversee the transfer of the scientists from Zion H.Q. to the new Agent Research Section, of which I'll be Chief."

"Unlike my current and largely bureaucratic position, as Section Chief I will be expected to be the senior researcher for the Section. I'll be doing the analysis of the data that I've collected on our research subject myself, as leader of a team of scientists."

Anne inquired, "What data? He's just been lying there all this time. Other than his effects, which are still sitting in a box on your credenza from what I see, we got absolutely nothing from him."

"I agree, Brown's been pretty worthless to us, but his presence provided us with another subject who has proven to be a rich resource of data. Because of Jones, I am now the Resistance's senior expert on the Agent program. I'll be using all the data we've been compiling, to prove or disprove all those theories I postulated years ago before I came here to the Centre. My goal is to find a weapon to use against the machines. I want to wipe them out, wipe them all out."

"All I have to do is to manage to survive long enough to do that. It's going to require some further field work to do the testing. Some of our best field operatives will be assisting me with that, including Neo. Neo may be my only defense against the Agents. I've also been assigned a team of programmers to complete the Mortal Kombat-style game I've been developing that runs in the Construct. Because I replaced the top villains with Agents whose functionality profiles are based on what has been developed from the research data, it's going to be our new Agent training program. It's time to find their weak points and train our people to survive a fight with them."

I sighed and sat at my desk, "Looks like my long days of bureaucratic bliss are over. It's time I went back to being a scientist again."

"What about us," Lisa questioned. "Which section will we belong to?"

"I sure hope it's not the Agent section," Anne remarked with distaste.

"No, I couldn't do that to you guys. You will be moving over to the new building with your new Section Chief. I don't know who they've selected, but you can bet they will be Intelligence. I'll be overseeing the entire transition myself. That will keep me busy while they train all the Zion H.Q. staff to work within the Matrix-most of these people haven't been inside since they were unplugged. It will also keep you two busy as you are going to help me."

"What's our time frame?" Lisa wanted to know.

"We are looking at thirty days until completion, so it's time to get busy. " I erased the whiteboard and started outlining their duties during the transition period.

Days turned into weeks and the thirty days were soon over. Tomorrow my new staff would be moving in. The last boxes had been moved to the new building and all of my former staff had said their goodbyes to me. They were only moving a few buildings away in the office park, but I rarely left the building. Somewhere out there, Agent Brown was looking for me, and Jones was most likely helping him.

Every few days Agent Jones would leave me a voice mail requesting contact, but I never replied. Using the radio was too dangerous-Brown would hear me as well. I wasn't sure what was behind the requests, but I had a feeling that he was looking to turn me to the 'dark side' and get me to betray the Resistance in some way. Talk about barking up the wrong tree. Either that or he was trying to set me up so that Brown could pick me off. Agents tend to have a poor opinion of human intelligence.

It was a gloomy, gray day, like most days in New England. My favorite kind of day to take the boat out. There would be a bit of a chop that would keep most of the boaters in. Pansies. I had just decided to risk going to the Marina when my phone rang. It was the Harbormaster.

"Afternoon, Ahab. Keeping an eye on my boat?"

"Actually, I'm keeping an eye on an Agent who seems to be looking for your boat."

Either Brown had tracked me as far as the Living Dead Girl or Jones was being annoyingly persistent. "Can you see him well enough to identify him?"

"They all look alike to me. Let's see, I've got that checklist around here somewhere." I heard some rustling and swearing and he came back on the phone. "Hmmmâ€|nope, I'm not sure. All I know is, it's definitely an Agent."

"Thanks, Ahab, I'll be right there." I changed into jeans and sneakers, checked my sidearm, zipped a windbreaker over it and stuffed an Uzi into my messenger bag. When dealing with Agents always remember to bring guns, lots of guns. I walked through the door into his office and went to the window to see which Agent had come calling.

I didn't need the offered binoculars to recognize Jones. He was standing on the dock where the Living Dead Girl had last been tied up and staring out towards open water. Did I mention that Agents have a

poor opinion of human intelligence?

I looked across the Marina where my boat was now docked. Renamed, re-registered under a different assumed name, repainted-she was right under his nose and he couldn't see her. The Harbormaster had ensured that there was no papertrail, he'd been doing it for years for me. It's not hard for human Intelligence to outsmart Agents.

I strolled casually down the stairs and crossed to the dock where Jones stood, and walked right up behind him. He was totally oblivious of my approach and I could have shot him where he stood, but not without attracting more attention than was healthy for me.

I reached up and removed his earpiece, "Looking for something, Jones?" He turned, startled, and I smirked up at him.

His face wore its usual impassive mask, eyes hidden behind his sunglasses, "I was looking for you. You haven't responded to my voice mail messages."

I turned and led him towards the neighboring dock where my boat was now moored, "No, I haven't. I've been busy. Besides, I well aware of the fact that if I use Brown's radio, he'll hear me too." I rolled my eyes at him, "You don't really think I'm THAT stupid do you?"

"No, I just, uh, wanted to check in with you. Let you know that Agent Brown is still searching for you."

"Yeah, " I tucked my arm through his, "I've missed you too, Jones. My life's been lacking a certain excitement since you and Brown walked out of it. I've spent the last month doing nothing but review reports, go to meetings, and rework our departmental org chart."

I stopped and admired my boat and her fancy new paint job. "You got a new boat?" Jones inquired.

"No, Jones, just covering my tracks. I know that Agent Brown won't stop looking for me until he finds me, and when he doesâ€¦" I pulled away from him and wrapped my arms around myself as I stood staring at the Girl's freshly painted new name. She was now named 'Rage Against the Machine'.

"Why did you name her that?"

"I usually name my boats for either a band or a song I like that says who I am or how I feel. This seemed most appropriate to describe how I'm feeling about spending the rest of my life being hunted by your colleague." I slipped off the mooring rope and stepped aboard her. Jones followed me up to the pilothouse where I raised her anchor and started her engines.

"Why rage? I would think fear would be what you would be feeling."

"As a result of my encounter with Brown and all that ensued, my whole life has been taken from me. I have a new job that I don't want. My friends at work have all been transferred elsewhere. I can't see Dave and Amy and my gang because Brown will show up in their bodies if I do. I'm totally alone and totally pissed right now. I'm not wasting time being afraid of the inevitable. I have accepted the fact that

Brown will one day find me and kill me. What annoys me is having to live as a virtual prisoner while I wait."

We slid through the water, passing the Harbormaster's office where Ahab stood and stared. He shook his head at me. *Don't worry, Ahab, I do know what I'm doing.*

I guided her out to open water, the water was a little rough, but I hate smooth sailing. I poured on the speed, lifting her up high out of the water and flipped on the sound system. Limp Bizkit was yelling about breaking something tonight, and I cranked it up.

At my usual place I shut down the Rage's engines and dropped anchor. I turned on the proximity detector that Neo had installed for me. If another boat got too close, the alarm would sound in enough time for me to get the hell out of there.

Jones followed me up to the deck in front of the pilothouse where I went to stand at the rail looking out over the wide expanse of gray skies and gray seas. He turned off the music and I looked at him, "What?"

He shrugged, "If there's anything I can do to take your mind off Agent Brown" he smiled smugly.

"No, Jones, thanks for the offer, but sex is not what I need. What I really need is a friend." I looked back out over the water.

He put his arm around my shoulder, "'With friends like you, who needs Agents?'" he quoted.

I leaned my head against him, "With Agents like you, who needs friends." I felt the chuckle rumble through his chest.

WHO DID SHE HAVE TO SLEEP WITH TO GET THIS JOB?

"So tell me," he began, "what exactly is a friend?"

I lifted my head and looked up at him, "You really don't know, do you?"

He shrugged, "Friendship is a particularly human concept. There is no corresponding concept among our kind. I have observed you interacting with those you call your friends and I am puzzled. Friends seem to trade insults, physical assault, humiliate one another, and invade your space."

"Yeah, we have a lot of fun together."

He looked puzzled. "Perhaps I do not understand 'fun' either."

"Man, it must suck to be one of your kind. No fun, no friends." I shook my head in mock dismay. "Friends are the people you can get stupid with. They are also the people who are there for you when you need company, someone to talk to, someone to hang out with, or a shoulder to cry on. There are many levels of friendship. Some friends of mine are very casual friends. We have something that we share, like working in the same place or going to the same clubs. Other friends like Dave and Amy, are people I've shared my life with and

that I love like family."

I could tell by the blank expression on his face that his processors were working overtime as he attempted to quantify all of this in machine terms. "Jones, don't fry your microchips trying to understand friendship. It's something you have to feel, you can't learn how to be a friend."

"Therefore, friendship cannot exist between us."

"You could be my friend, because I have feelings. And, thanks to the miracle of AI, you are capable of learning all of the correct behaviors so well that no one will be able to tell the difference. You can learn how to take and dish out insults, the finer points of rough horseplay, and to shut up and listen if I need to vent, that sort of thing." I smiled inwardly at the thought of corrupting an Agent with all of my favorite bad behaviors.

"You will teach me these things?"

"Sure. Let's go astern and sit down and I'll teach you all of my favorite insults. We'll save the horseplay for later. You'll have to be very careful, you aren't supposed to actually hurt anyone. It's just for fun."

We sat one of the benches, and I gave him a lecture on the fine art of insulting and behaving as if insulted. I wasn't heavyweight insult champion when I was growing up for nothing.

It was after dark when I docked the Rage and split up with Jones. He gave me his cell phone number so I could return his calls without using the radio. The Harbormaster was waiting for me in his office. "Dangerous company you are keeping, Phoenix."

"Actually, it's bizarre to say this, but I'm safer with that particular Agent than without him. It's the other Agent, Brown, who is actively hunting me. This one is very curious about humanity. As long as I'm teaching him something about us, I'm not in danger from him. I don't trust him," I patted my sidearm through my jacket, "but he's getting something he wants from me. Scientific curiosity I well understand. I'm very curious about them as well, for my own reasons. More than likely we are both trying to figure out how to destroy the other race."

"I worry about you, that's all." I patted his weathered cheek and answered the ringing phone. Time to go back to the real world and get a good night's sleep. My first staff meeting with my new research team was tomorrow.

I waited until my staff had entered the Matrix before I went in. I wasn't looking forward to encountering them, from what I knew of them they were not going to be easy or pleasant to deal with. The word was that they assumed I was just another time-serving bureaucrat being rewarded with a high-profile administrative position. They were in for a rude awakening. I decided to keep them cooling their heels in the conference room as a subtle reminder of the new power structure within the department.

I sat at my desk and logged in to a chat room I occasionally hung out in. At this time of day only the die-hard gamerz and hackerz and

poserz had showed up.

CHEATMASTER: Hi all MK4 ADDICT: Hey CM, long time, no seeâ€|how's things in your world? CHEATMASTER: Not bad, busy and annoying...same old same old:) yourz? MK4 ADDICT: SOS, CM. The Matrix has me in its grip SLACKERHACKER: Me too, it's got me by the nads. Nothing went right today. AB: Hi, what's this room about? CHEATMASTER (via Instant Message to MK4): great, another loser. Let's have some fun with him MK4 ADDICT (via IM): lets see how long it takes before he gets the message and gets lost CHEATMASTER (via IM): or I have to strike him out CHEATMASTER: Welcome, AB. Be you hacker or be you gamer? AB: A little of both, I certainly like playing games CHEATMASTER (via IM): oh brother, what a lamer CHEATMASTER: Steerike one ALPHA GEEK: you sound like you really fit in with us dude-you looking for warez? AB: warez? CHEATMASTER: Steerike two HACKER BOY: if you don't know what warez are, you must be looking for cheatz :) AB:cheatz? CHEATMASTER: Steerike three CHEATMASTER: Youurrrr OUT! AB vanishes from the room list CHEATMASTER: that's another K for the wall ALPHA GEEK: The crowd goes wild! HACKER BOY: CM! CM! CM! CHEATMASTER: I'll be back later peoplez, gonna get some ph0ud.

I logged out and left my office, without noticing the blinking mail icon in my systray. I walked down the hall to the conference room, hearing loud voices and raucous laughter spilling out through the open door. Some were speculating about my qualifications for the position. Swill was teasing the Ratman, and Xenium was playing Pac-Man on his laptop.

Avon was speaking as I walked in and stood behind where he sat in my chair, "All I want to know is, who did she have to sleep with to get this job?"

I cleared my throat and he looked around, "I'm sorry, you wouldn't believe me if I told you, but he was fantastic. Swill, give the Ratman back his rodent. Xenium, this is not an arcade."

He smirked and glanced at his colleagues around the table, "I'm sure you didn't have as good a time as the Screamer."

"The Screamer? And who, pray tell, is that?"

"I don't know but I sure would like to meet her. Choad, put the CD in and play it for our new 'boss'."

One of his buddies put a CD in the room's sound system and suddenly the sound of my own screams filled the air. Shit. All Agent Encounter reports were entered under code names to protect the identities of the operatives outside of Intelligence, and I'd put my own under the highest classified status, but the recording had circulated freely. Thank God on one knew who the Screamer was, or that she was screaming the name of an Agent.

I switched off the screaming, "That's enough, Avon. You can get out of my chair now."

He swiveled around, "Actually, this is MY chair. I've run this team for years and I don't need some self-serving political appointee walking in here and telling me what to do." He smiled triumphantly and turned back to face his smirking colleagues.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I focused on the trio of portraits on the far wall. Once duplicates of the photos of the Agents in my office, someone had made minor alterations to each of them. Agent Smith had a black eye and a bloody nose, Brown had lost most of his hair, and Jones's eyes were badly crossed and he appeared to have buckteeth.

My voice was as charmingly polite as ever, "Avon, I believe I instructed you to get out of my chair."

"No, I am the senior expert on the Agent program. You sit down and listen to me."

I shrugged, reached inside my suit jacket and thumbed off the safety, "Because I believe in fair play, I'll give you a third chance to strike out."

"Screw you. I'm not putting up with some broad giving me orders."

"Suit yourself." I drew my pistol and squeezed off three rounds. Each Agent's photo now bore a fresh bullet hole. Right between the eyes. I holstered my sidearm and slid into my freshly vacated seat.

I opened my portfolio and picked up my pen. "I believe we are ready to begin." I smiled around the table.

"Avon, as you are the self-appointed senior expert on the Agent program, can you give me your analysis of and any conclusions based on the raw data contained in the report filed by the field operative XTC32?" OK, maybe they shouldn't have let me choose my own usercode to file my reports under, but I had to have one different from the code I'd been using all these years on my analysis and summary reporting.

He gave me a dirty look, "As you would know if you were one of the real researchers around here, that report has been deemed highly classified by those jerk-offs in Intelligence. I did obtain a copy of PHX05's summary through my usual channels." He sat back with a smug look. "It's been heavily edited, there's not much here to go on. I'm afraid this operative has provided us with no new or useful information regarding the Agent program. I see no reason to examine it further."

"The system recorded your request for it as always. Clumsy, Avon, very clumsy." I removed a thick folder from beneath my portfolio and flipped through it. "I've just been reviewing the full report myself. There's a considerable amount of data here, and the operative continues to file updates."

He looked annoyed and held out his hand for it. I put it back under my portfolio, "Oh, I'm sorry Avon. I haven't assigned you the security clearance required for access to this report. I guess you'll have to make do with what I put in the summary." I looked around the table at the rest of the team, "Your clearances have all been upgraded to give you access to this report, it has been forwarded to your inboxes."

I capped my pen and closed my portfolio. There was dead silence in the room, except for the sound of Avon grinding his teeth. "We'll

meet to review the data in one week. Avon, let me know when you wish to apply for an upgraded security clearance. It is required if you wish to continue as a member of this team. That will be all."

I stood up and walked out. Avon's a brilliant scientist, but he's a little too impressed with his own brilliance. I made a mental note to replace the pictures, I might need to get the team's attention again.

I went back to my office and checked my email. There was one addressed to the CHEATMASTER from AB. All it said was, "how did you do that?"

I replied, "If you have the right warez and cheatz, you can do anything. If you don't know what warez and cheatz are, you totally suck ass, and are a loser. Go hang out in another chat room, I'm sure there's plenty of room in Lamers Anonymous." Several good field operatives had come from the kids in that chat room and the last thing I needed was some idiot asking stupid questions. I sent an email to Trinity asking her to take over watching the chat there. She knows the game, just as well as I do.

NEXT INSTALLMENT: YOU'VE GOT MAIL!

End
file.